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REORIENTATION--"THE OPEN BOAT." LITERATURE CURRICULUM III, TEACHER VERSION.

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IN THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR NINTH-GRADE ENGLISH CLASSES, AN APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF STEPHEN CRANE'S "THE OPEN BOAT" WAS OUTLINED. THE APPROACH EMPHASIZED DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY'S SUBJECT, FORM, AND POINT-OF-VIEW. THIS APPROACH INCORPORATED THE PRINCIPLES OF ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE THAT WERE INTRODUCED IN THE OREGON SCHOOLS IN THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADES. COMPARISONS WITH PREVIOUS STYLES, SUBJECTS, AND SYMBOLISM WERE SUGGESTED, AS WELL AS, PARTICULAR REFERENCES TO QUESTIONS OF "MAN, NATURE, AND OTHER MEN." THE CORRESPONDING STUDENT GUIDE IS ED 010 825. RELATED REPORTS ARE ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160 AND ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832. (PM)

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REORIENTATION: "THE OPEN BOAT"

By Stephen Crane

Literature Curriculum III
Teacher Version

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Reorientation: "The Open Boat"
by Stephen Crane

The seventh and eighth grade orientation units included several forms of literature, storied and non-storied. This unit will involve only one story, since more mature ninth grade students should be able to recall the principles taught in past years more quickly and to grasp them with less repetition. Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" has been selected because it is rich in the problems of meaning and technique which students need to review at the beginning of a new year.

Since only one form of literature is actually presented in the unit, it is important that students be reminded of how this compares with other forms. Questions such as how this story is like or unlike an essay, a ballad, a lyric poem, are important. You might also bring out ways in which the story compares with specific selections read in the eighth grade.

It is important that the discussion clearly bring out the three-fold pattern of analysis used in the past: Subject, Form, and Point of View. And once again, students should be made aware of how impossible it is to draw absolute lines between the three areas. For example, Crane's symbolism is part of Subject because it helps to bring out the abstract meaning of the four men's experience. Yet it is also part of Form, of the way in which this meaning is presented. And since it reflects the attitude of the narrator, it is also associated with the story's Point of View.

The seventh grade study of Subject revolved chiefly around the concept that literature generally has both concrete and abstract subject matter, that it is about specific actions or things but that it also is about abstract principles or themes. Students should be able to see this duality easily in a discussion of "The Open Boat." It may, however, be a little more difficult to bring out the differences between storied and non-storied literature, studied in the eighth grade. Comparative examples will probably have to be used: "The Open Boat" relates the details of an event, as opposed to such non-storied materials as "Joan and David" or "The School Store" (eighth grade unit, "Non-Storied Forms"), in which the main principle of organization is something other than narrative. The discussion could also pave the way for the greater emphasis on thematic motifs to come out in the ninth and tenth grades.

Comparative examples will be helpful in bringing out various aspects of Form, particularly the prose-poetry and genre distinctions introduced in the seventh grade. Students should be reminded that the form grows from the subject. For example, whether the concrete subject is storied or non-storied will dictate whether the resulting work is a short story or an essay, a narrative or a lyric poem. Thus, since we have storied and non-storied subject matter for literature, the works take storied and non-storied forms.

Although some comparison may again be helpful, "The Open Boat" in itself presents rich opportunities for discussion of Point of View. You will want to be sure that students recall the meaning of the technical terms

used to describe Point of View: first person, third person, omniscient, modified omniscient, etc. It should be clear to them by now that even when he speaks in the first person, the author may be speaking in the voice of a persona, of someone not himself. And the non-technical aspects of Point of View should not be neglected; it must be remembered that the term applies to the attitude taken by the author as well as to the voice in which he speaks.

"The Open Boat" is a piece of literature well worthy of study in and for itself. So throughout the unit, a dual purpose should be kept in mind: the story should be discussed as an individual piece of literature, but with persistent reference to the principles studied in the past two years, which must be firmly reestablished before the more advanced work of the ninth grade can begin.

I. Man, Nature, and Other Men.

The concrete subject of "The Open Boat" is the events of thirty hours which four men spend in a dinghy. Crane subtitled the story, "A Tale Intended to Be After the Fact," since he, a correspondent, had been in a similar episode. The events related really happened, but the work is called a short story, a piece of fiction, because it was designed to present artistic rather than actual truth, because Crane rearranged the facts where he wished in order to better present the abstract subject matter in which he was most interested. We might say that the emphasis in the subtitle is on the word "Tale."

Not only the arrangement of the facts but also the ways in which they are presented, the imagery, the symbolism, the descriptive style, are planned to bring out this abstract subject matter, this artistic truth. Although the exact meaning of the story has been debated, it certainly has to do with the indifference of nature toward the individual man, and with the effect that an awareness of this indifference has on the relationship of man to man.

The attitude toward nature is an aspect both of Subject and of Point of View. And it is an attitude created partially by the form, by the method of presentation. At first, nature is shown to be cruel but also beautiful. It is largely the imagery which creates the impression of cruelty: the waves are like rocks, are "wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall," are snarling, full of wrath, like white flames. In the beginning, the sea is often personified, as if it intentionally mistreated the men; a wave may seem like the "last effort of the grim water," and the boat wallows "at the mercy of five seas." Yet the narrator is also aware that "it was probably glorious, this play of the free sea, wild with lights of emerald and white and amber." The idea of intentional cruelty is, however, shown to be in the collective minds of the men by the repeated refrain, "If I am going to be drowned. . . why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? . . . If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. . . . But no; she cannot mean to drown me. . . ."

But in the latter part of the story, the images of cruelty largely disappear, until nature is seen not as a temple but as a cold and remote star, as a power which simply regards man as unimportant. And the shark, another part of nature, is an enemy, but one that quickly grows bored with the unimportant men. To the correspondent, the tower on the beach comes to stand for "the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual--nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent."

The final attitude is the more horrifying to the correspondent, and with it he develops a deeper feeling of association with his fellow men. The opinion that nature is cruel brings about a "subtle brotherhood" between the men in the dinghy, who were "friends in a more curiously ironbound degree than may be common." The men served the captain with absolute cooperation and obedience, "and after this devotion to the commander of the boat, there was this comradeship, that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life." But just after the comparison of nature to a high, cold, and obviously indifferent star, we see that this "subtle brotherhood" has been extended, in the correspondent's mind, to all mankind, even to the soldier of Algiers who dies in the song. As the horror of nature increases, the relationships between the men who must fight it to keep alive are strengthened; according to Richard P. Adams, "Crane, like Arnold in 'Dover Beach,' seems to maintain that because the world is indifferent, because human feelings are in human beings only and not in nature, men should be true to one another, and are most likely to be so when they are most in the grip of impersonal cosmic forces."* And so at the end, as they lie on the beach, the men can see that the waves are not wrathful, but are merely pacing to and fro, accidentally damaging anything which comes in their way. And with this realization, they can be "interpreters"--they can understand the universe, for they know what nature is to men, and therefore they know how men must act toward one another.

Some idea of the character of each man is necessary if the reader is to understand the meaning of their actions toward each other. Crane does little generalizing about his characters; instead he introduces them in the third through sixth paragraphs by describing them performing actions which to some degree reveal their characters. We learn that the cook is fat, talkative, and perhaps a little afraid. The oiler is a skilled seaman, but he is using "a thin little oar" which "seemed often ready to snap," symbolic of his easily lost life. The party's intellectual, the correspondent, wonders why he is there; the captain has the strength to be a steady commander despite his dejection. These are, then, men with very little in common; only an outside force, such as the sea, could draw them into such close comradeship.

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*Richard P. Adams, "Naturalistic Fiction: 'The Open Boat'," Tulane Studies in English, IV (1954), pp. 137-146.

The basic thematic idea that fighting nature brings about in the men a deep knowledge and a feeling of closeness is common to most interpretations of the story, although several variations on this concept exist. Some see an existentialist message that the world is absurd as the heart of the story. Others give it a religious interpretation, seeing Billie the oiler or the nude rescuer as a Christ figure who saves the souls of the others and enables them to be "interpreters." Of course, students should be led to form their own interpretations, neither the one presented here nor any other should be insisted upon. But they must also be kept aware that they must be able to support any interpretive statement they make with details from the story.

II. The Three-Fold Point of View.

The complex point of view of the story grows to some extent out of the subject matter. Crane wishes to show the changes which go on in the minds of the men, and particularly of the correspondent. So he makes some observations on what the whole group was thinking but also at times singles out the correspondent. For instance, it is the whole group which envies the birds who ride easily on the sea, which finds it easy "to conjure pictures of all kinds of incompetency and blindness" among their supposed rescuers which at the end "felt that they could then be interpreters." But it is in the mind of the correspondent alone that we see the shark, the feelings about the song of the man who lay dying in Algiers, and the whole final experience of swimming to the shore. Since the correspondent is the group's intellectual, it is through him that many of the story's symbols are brought out--the high cold star, the indifferent tower.

But it is advantageous for the reader to gain a clear picture of the experience which changed the men's ways of thinking, a picture which is not clouded by passing through the minds of the participants. So Crane also uses an omniscient narrator to give an objective view of the situation and comment upon it. At times it is difficult to separate this point of view from the others; for example, the next to the last paragraph begins with "It seems. . ." One might easily ask, seems to whom? To the narrator? To the whole group of men? Or to the correspondent, whose thoughts make up the previous paragraph?

Since this story is about a change in attitude and the events which bring it about, the non-technical aspects of point of view are so much a part of the subject that they have already been rather fully discussed. We have already seen the way in which the change from seeing nature as cruel to seeing her as indifferent makes the correspondent feel closer not only to the other men in the boat but to all mankind. The total attitude of the work has frequently been labelled as naturalistic. In a naturalistic universe, nature is flatly indifferent, but usually man loses his struggle against this environment. Although here, by the ironic touch of chance, the strong and generous Billie loses his life, the others win the battle and are even made better men by the experience. If this is naturalism, it is Crane's own special brand of naturalism, in which an encounter with natural forces either destroys a man or betters him. There is an admixture of the romantic notion that a man must prove himself in the face of death--much as legendary medieval knights proved themselves by fighting monsters or dragons.

III. The Intricate Question of Form.

In form, "The Open Boat" can be labelled as a piece of prose, a storied form, and a short story. Each of these classifications should be briefly discussed to bring back the distinctions made in previous years. But the question of form is too intricate to be answered simply by sticking labels on a piece of writing. The labels put the work in certain categories, but each work has individual aspects of form which make it different from every other piece of writing, which make it worth reading and discussing in and for itself. Two works of literature may have the same subject and be written from the same point of view. But because the subject may suggest different means of presentation, different forms, to different writers or even to the same writer at different times, we may find it worthwhile to read numerous works on the same subject. For example, Crane puts some of these same materials and ideas into a poem, "A man adrift on a slim spar," which comes to the conclusion that "God is cold," quite similar to the notion that nature is indifferent. (This poem is probably a little difficult for classroom use, although advanced students might enjoy comparing it with "The Open Boat."

Like many short stories and novels, "The Open Boat" makes some use of the tragic pattern (traditional in drama) in the foreshadowing of the death of Billie the oiler. As Stanley Greenfield has stated, "Though. . . the oiler's death is 'undetermined' and gratuitous, Crane certainly manages to suggest aesthetically that it is inevitable. . . ."* We have already observed the symbolism in the thin oar Billie holds. His strength and generosity, the very things which would cause him to be the one to survive in a rational universe, make him the most likely one to die in a work designed to show a capricious, uncaring view of nature.

Another motif which is probably already familiar to students and which will become much more so this year is the journey pattern. The story is formed around both a physical journey and a mental one, in which the correspondent and possibly the whole group is led by the experience to a new set of opinions and values.

A less familiar formal aspect is what Robert W. Stallman calls the "double mood"** of the story, the alternation between build-ups of hope or illusion and descents into futility, despair, and disillusionment. Small alternations are constantly noticeable, as in the conversation at the end of section I about the house of refuge. In a larger sense, the story begins on a note of despair, followed by hope when the lighthouse is spotted, then by despair through the night and some renewed hope in the morning. The rhythmic pattern is further emphasized by the repetition of refrain-like lines, such as "Funny they haven't seen us," "If this wind holds," "Will you spell me," and the longer formula, "If I am going to be drowned. . . ."

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*Stanley B. Greenfield, "The Unmistakable Stephen Crane," PMLA, LXXIII (1958), p. 565.

**Robert Wooster Stallman, "Stephen Crane: A Revaluation," in John W. Aldridge, ed., Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, New York, 1952, p. 259.

What we have said here, particularly in the sections on Subject and Form, can only begin to bring out the richness of the story. For as Stallman has noted, "Crane charged every realistic detail with symbolic significance." Almost every noun and many of the verbs and adjectives are worthy of some sort of comment. So the story should prove a fruitful means of rediscovering the principles studied in the past two years and for encouraging students to form once again the habit of exploring the details of a piece of literature for themselves.

* * *

Since you may wish to put some extra effort into this first and very important unit, a more extensive bibliography is given than usual. Some of the interpretations offered here are quite conventional; some are very unusual. You will of course wish to push none of them upon your students, but to leave them free to form their own opinions. Indeed, a broad reading in critical articles such as the following serves to show that no one interpretation can be insisted upon as absolutely correct.

Adams, Richard P. "Naturalistic Fiction: 'The Open Boat,'" Tulane Studies in English, IV (1954), 137-146. --Primarily about the position Crane takes between the naturalists and the realists; also explores the symbolism of the story.

Buitenhuis, Peter. "The Essentials of Life: 'The Open Boat' as Existentialist Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies, V (1959), 243-250. --Sees the story as pointing out the absurdities of life, which man must accept as the responsibility of being a man.

Cady, Edwin H. Stephen Crane, New York, 1962, pp. 151-155. --Investigates point of view as related to theme.

Greenfield, Stanley B. "The Unmistakable Stephen Crane," PMLA, LXXIII (1958), 562-572 (564-565 specifically on "The Open Boat"). --Refutes Stallman's theory that this is a religious salvation allegory; gives some general discussion of form and symbolism.

Marcus, Mordecai. "The Three-Fold View of Nature in 'The Open Boat'," Philological Quarterly, XLI (1962), 511-515.

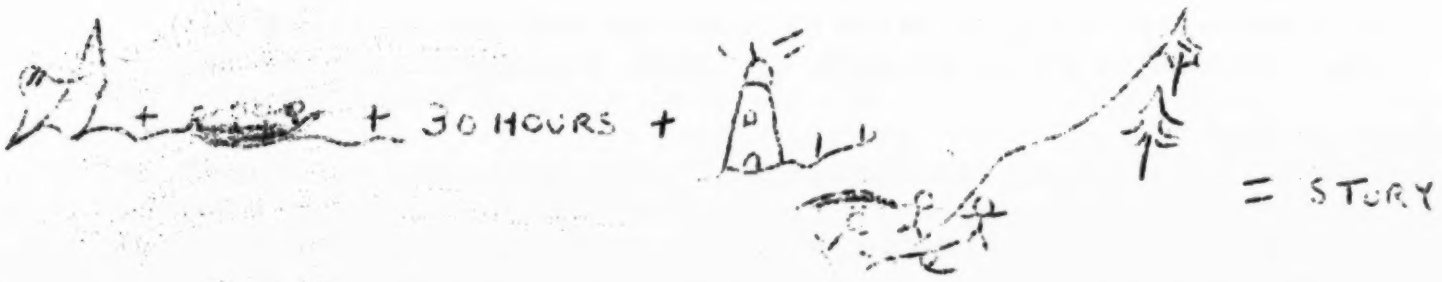
Meyers, Robert. "Crane's The Open Boat," Explicator, XXI (1963), Item 60. --An unusual and certainly debatable explication of the story as an anti-Christian allegory about the founding of a new religion.

Stallman, Robert Wooster. "Stephen Crane: A Revaluation," in John W. Aldridge, ed., Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, New York, 1952, pp. 244-269 (259-262 specifically on "The Open Boat"). --Discussion of hope-despair alternation and of symbolism.

West, Ray B., Jr., and Robert Wooster Stallman. The Art of Modern Fiction, New York, 1949, pp. 53-57. --Investigation of theme and of the question of whether this story may be termed fiction.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. You have read "The Open Boat." A natural first question concerns what you, the reader, expect and find. What is "The Open Boat" about? What is its subject? Is the story simple or is it complex? Look at this equation.



2. Is this equation an exploded diagram, or a skeleton, or what? Don't try to decide on an absolute answer now. Come back to the equation later.

NOTE: Students should see that this equation is not an exploded diagram because it accounts for only a bare sequence of concrete events. Although analogy is not introduced as a rhetorical device until the 10th grade, the process of analogy is probably familiar. Everyone should be aware of the limitations of the analogy this unit begins with. Literature is not machinery, but the principles of understanding are similar. The diagram does offer a starting point.

3. You may remember talking last year about a writer's subject and the uses he puts it to. The open boat to which these four different human beings cling for their lives is a vehicle, a ten-foot long "world" that carries them on a journey toward hoped-for safety. But "The Open Boat" as a story is also a vehicle, you may discover, carrying much more for you, the reader, than just a harrowing adventure.

How do the narrator's opinions and feelings about the sea change as the story progresses?
What is the narrator saying in section 2 with the words "It was probably splendid"?
Does the presence of the gulls add excitement and color to the narrative, or something more than that?
To what extent does the paragraph in section 3 on "brotherhood" add depth of meaning to the story?
What significance is there to the narrator's remembering during the night the old song about the soldier in Algiers?
What causes the men's opinions of the rest of humanity, as expressed at the end of section 3, to change in section 4?
How important is the oiler in the story? Is he more or less significant than the man who "shone like a saint"?

How is the idea of Fate connected in the minds of the men with their efforts to get safely to shore?
What suggestions has the narrator made concerning man's place in the universe?
What suggestions has the narrator made concerning man's relation to other men?
Why is the final scene played at dawn?
To what use does the narrator put the wind tower?

Do you think now that the equation in the diagram corresponds to an exploded diagram? Does our diagram really explain how this story "works"?

4. One of the most interesting matters for discussion in this story is its point of view. Someone is telling "a tale intended to be after the fact" in the past tense; the narrative is also told in the third person. But point of view in this story is a bit more complicated than that.

In section 2 nearly every word presents what was done, what was said, and what was seen. Where are the exceptions to this? Whose thoughts do these exceptions represent? What evidence is there for your answer?
Find passages in which you seem to know what all the men are thinking. How do these passages differ from those which seem to be one man's thoughts?
Find some passages that seem to represent the omniscient point of view.
Of the three ways of looking at the events in this story and the meaning of these events, which contributes most to the larger or expanded subject of the story?

Point of view is also expressed through language, through the words the writer chooses. Find passages in which attitudes are expressed that are 1) humorous, 2) confident, 3) ironic, 4) angry, 5) depressed, 6) detached, 7) fearful, 8) puzzled.
Perhaps you will find other attitudes expressed in the story. Examine the way these attitudes of points of view, as expressed in the narrator's choice of words, change and develop throughout the story.
Do you find the changing attitudes consistent with the events of the narrative?

NOTE: The sixth paragraph presents not only the suggestion of a collective attitude but also "A young man thinks doggedly. . . ." The first paragraph's last line seems to present an even more detached point of view. Probably the students will discover that the inner thoughts of no character except the correspondent are given. They will then probably begin to feel that Crane and "the correspondent" are in some sense one and the same. The "splendid" and "glorious" are certainly the expression of some superior or uninvolved attitude toward the sea.

5. "The Open Boat" is in the form of a narrative. But form is not the easiest aspect of a literary work to discuss. Form is often a matter of

meaningful contrasts and echoes (repeated actions and statements) that not only hold the story together but carry it along to its logical conclusion.

In what way is the sea necessary to the form of the story?
How does the boat offer a contrast to the sea?
What simple contrasts do you find among the four men? Which ones are developed more completely?
Would you say that the information about the oiler is presented directly and obviously, or is it more like an undercurrent? Does the narrator's method serve to hold the story together?
Time, distance, and direction are all important in this story. Consider each in turn. How has Crane used the effect of time to support the narrative?
Part of the formal design of this story comes from the changing relationship between the men in the boat and the landmarks and the people on the shore. How does this changing relationship support the irony of the story?

Crane has made us very conscious of the rhythm of the waves that toss the little boat about. There are other rhythms in the story that you might consider as you discuss form.

When are the men optimistic? When are they pessimistic?
What use does Crane make of night and day to support the events of the story?
Find passages where feelings of optimism and pessimism are presented somehow at the same time.
Locate the important "echoes" or repetitions throughout the story. What seems to be the purpose of them? Or do they serve different purposes?
How does Crane manage the pace or speed of the narrative? Find those passages where you get a sense of speed, and then find others where the pace is slow.
What reasons are there for altering the rhythm and speed of the story?

NOTE: The tracing of the oiler's words and acts should also give to the students a sense of the inevitableness of his death and the sacrifice that it represents. "Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends." But this act has been "simplified." And the questions in section 5 may be re-examined here in terms of that final statement ". . . and they felt that they could then be interpreters."

Because this unit began with an analogy between "exploded diagrams" and the mental activity that students engage in when they "open up" a literary work, the students should be encouraged to re-read "The Open Boat" at some not-too-distant date. This may help them to discover for themselves how literary discussion of this kind gives them, ultimately, the whole work for their deepened pleasure.

Conclusions

Read the last sentence of "The Open Boat." Try to express clearly

just what it is that the survivors will "interpret." How does the meaning of this word differ from mere "telling"?

What seems more important, the events that happened to these men, or the meaning of the events to these men?

Does this story satisfy your expectations? During the year you will read a variety of literary works; you will make personal judgments concerning the writers' choice of subject, form, and point of view. When you answer the questions, How? and Why? you will be deepening your understanding of the great variety of purposes and methods writers use to give you pleasure in your reading.

Here is the newspaper account of the sinking of the "Commodore." After you re-read "The Open Boat," you may want to discuss briefly the differences in the accounts and the different purposes of the men who wrote them. (See Student Version for text.)